

Lent v (B)  
March 29, 2009

St. Margaret's  
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.  
*Amen.*

Well, it's the Fifth Sunday of Lent, and I don't know about you, but I am ready for Lent to be over! Of course, much of the Christian world, at least in this country, isn't even aware of Lent. So, here we are (we Episcopalians -- along with our Lutheran and Catholic brothers and sisters) -- here we are, out of step again!

While the Protestant world around us is already getting into the Easter spirit, we're still trudging through Lent. And while they will be gearing up in earnest next week on Palm Sunday, we will enter into Holy Week; that space of days that marks and defines who we are... that leads inexorably toward Good Friday before getting to Easter morning.

So while Jeremiah predicts the new covenant, the gospel of John describes the cost of that new covenant. "...Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." In order to fulfill his mission... in order to become available to all people, to the whole world (not just the tiny, local community he has traveled), Jesus must give up his life.

All well and good... until he involves us, saying, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me..." Gone from preachin' to meddlin', as the saying goes. It's one thing to be telling us what will be required of him; it's quite another to tell us that we must do the same: give up our lives.

It's this the same Jesus who, just a couple of chapters back in this same gospel, told us that he came that we might have abundant life?

Who gathered little children to come close and gather 'round him?  
Who raised his friend Lazarus from the dead... back into *this* life?

What on earth does he mean, Hate this life?

The very suggestion makes me think of all the things I love about this life. My life with Bill... our home... my ministry. The joy of our grown children... the smiles of each grandchild... the laughter of this grandchild. And other things -- the beach, the night sky, music, the green of spring trees against an aching blue sky. So many things in this life to love. I sometimes catch myself praying that it never end! And then I wonder... where is the line between love of life... and idolatry?

This is the thing, Jesus says: there is a principle of nature that requires death in order that there be new life. And there is a principle of discipleship that requires the death of our self-centeredness -- the death of idolatry -- in order that we share in his eternal life. <sup>i</sup>

I am thinking that Jesus' use of the word "hate" is hyperbole for giving up the various forms of idolatry in which indulge; those things that we worship; those things that, truth be told, we put before God.

Sometimes the idols in our lives are things; possessions, persons, dearly held ideas or opinions. Often they are things that, in and of themselves, are quite fine... until we dip them in gold and set them up on some sort of altar. I remember several years ago the flack over the then "new" prayer book. No matter that the Book of Common Prayer has been revised numerous times over the centuries... you'd have thought it was the end of Christendom!

Years later, when I visited a quite elderly parishioner in the hospital, she began to talk about the then sixteen-year-old prayer book -- and I inwardly groaned and braced myself for the coming tirade -- when she said, "I don't know what all the fuss was about; you'd have thought they worshiped the book instead of God!" And I marveled at her insight and wisdom.

We are very creative in this endeavor. We can make idols of all sorts of things. The Bible, for instance, or a particular translation of it... or a certain way of doing a thing, most especially in church... being right (this is a particularly insidious one)... or the flag, the nation, being patriotic in a certain way.

Even our love for a dearly loved one can become an idol -- someone we set apart and in effect say to God, not this one; you can't have this one.

But perhaps the most pervasive form of idolatry in which we participate is believing that we own our own lives. We act like our lives belong to us; like we have a right to it. It's one thing to say that we have a constitutional right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It's something else altogether to act as if God owes it to us, when in fact, we had no hand in creating it and have only a marginal participation in sustaining it.

An extension of that illusion of ownership of our lives is thinking we're in control! Of course, time and again, circumstances (also known as Life) try to dissuade<sup>ii</sup> of this illusion, but we persist nonetheless. For instance, the Goodfellows Insurance Company has sold insurance to 40,000 people to cover them in case they are abducted or impregnated by aliens. (I'm not making up this stuff!)

When Y2K was impending,<sup>i</sup> 15,000 women took out policies to cover themselves in case they were selected to give birth to the Messiah. These are folks who, I venture to say, believe themselves in possession of their lives... who have turned that self-interest into idols.<sup>ii</sup>

C.S. Lewis once said: "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."<sup>iii</sup>

When we think we own our lives, when we think we're in control, we don't concern ourselves with, as Lewis calls it, the other world. The paradox is that when we acknowledge that we belong to God, we treasure the gift of life, but we know it is a gift.

The paradox of giving up our lives... of letting go of idols, whatever they may be... that when we do, when we give up idolatry, and give over ourselves to God, God gives back our lives, and in fact blesses the things we treasure. When we give up the illusion of control, God entrusts us with our lives while never leaving us.

Lewis also said, "Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth, you will get neither." <sup>iv</sup>

From an earlier era an old pastor, a Rev. Temple tells the story about himself and his young son:

*When my son was small, we often walked together out through the fields and neighboring pasture behind the parsonage. At first the little fellow would hold onto my little finger, but he found that when he stepped into a hoof-print or stumbled over something, his grip would fail and down he'd go in the dust or snow. Not giving it much thought, my mind on other matters, I'd stop and he'd get up, brush himself off, and grab my little finger again, gripping a little harder this time.*

*Needless to say, this occurred frequently until one day as he was brushing himself off, he looked up and said, "Daddy?" I replied, "Yes, son, what is it?" He said, "I think if you would hold my hand, I wouldn't fall."*

*Pastor Temple says, "You know, he still stumbled many times after that, but he never hit the ground. Now, as we walk with God, don't try to hold on to God, let God hold on to you. You may stumble, but God will never let you fall."*

"Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me," Jesus says, "must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, God will honor." (John 12:ff) To serve Jesus and to follow him... that means giving up what we love most but is not truly ours... in order to gain nothing less than God in Christ.

So here we are... once again about to confront Palm Sunday and the Passion of Jesus -- his suffering and death. Will we give up our lives and follow? Or not? It is the ultimate question of faith. How will we answer it?

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<sup>i</sup> Preaching Through the Christian Year B, page 164

<sup>ii</sup> LectionAid, Vol. 11, No. 2, Year B, page 25

<sup>iii</sup> Illustrations Unlimited, page 175

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, page 175

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, page 244